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ABSTRACT

A research project identified five clusters of behaviorally-grounded competencies that distinguished effective teachers and mentors from average ones. Effective faculty members: (1) were student-centered; (2) believed that learning is a highly valuable activity; (3) were sensitive to the needs of their adult students and established situations that were conducive to adult learning; (4) took a highly directive role in their students' learning; and (5) made use of their students' interests, attitudes, and experiences. In short, effective teachers balanced student-centeredness with firm directiveness. (DC)

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THE BALANCING ACT: COMPETENCIES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS AND MENTORS

by Carol Schneider, George O. Klemp, Jr., and Susan Kastendiek

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THE BALANCING ACT: COMPETENCIES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS AND MENTORS

We undertook this research project to identify the skills, values and attitudes that underlie effective teaching in degree programs for adults by studying what effective teachers in these programs actually do. We conducted in-depth interviews with a study group, composed of persons regarded as particularly effective in classroom teaching and one-on-one mentoring; and a control group, composed of teachers whose effectiveness was considered average. Through a content analysis of the verbatim transcripts, we identified five clusters of behaviorally-grounded competencies that characterized the study group members and distinguished them from the control group.

As a group, the faculty members who were perceived as highly effective exhibited an orientation to teaching best described as student-centered: they saw themselves primarily as facilitators of their students' learning rather than as experts transmitting significant information. Fundamental to this overall concern was a high level of positive regard for students, both as persons and as learners. While almost all the faculty members we interviewed found some students in whose capabilities or potential they rejoiced, the characteristic that distinguished the effective teachers was their optimism about and affirmation of the accomplishments of average or even exceptionally difficult students. They rarely described students' weaknesses or problems without also finding something in those same students to affirm. Overall, the expression of positive expectations was a notably powerful theme in our interviews with the effective teachers. The expression of negative expectations, on the other hand, was the single most dominant theme in our interviews with the average faculty members.

Another manifestation of a general orientation to students is awareness of and responsiveness to their particular concerns or needs. Faculty members who lacked this competency were much more likely either to have difficulty remembering details of their interactions with students or to be uncertain about what the outcome of a particular situation with a student had finally been, sometimes due to the faculty member's inclination to put his or her own interests or well-being before the student's.

The study group was also characterized by the pervasive conviction that learning is, in and of itself, a highly valuable activity, a goal worthy of everyone's pursuit, and one that draws in its train a variety of rewards. This belief frequently led the effective teachers to present themselves as learners and thus, to align themselves with their students in the common cause of learning. Consequently, they tended to view specialized knowledge as a means or a resource for enhancing the goal of learning rather than as the goal for which learning is endured. The average faculty members, on the other hand, while frequently espousing an appreciation for humanistic education, virtually never described themselves as directly engaged in the learning they oversaw. Instead, they typically taught in ways that implied their greater commitment to exposing students to particular subjects or disciplinary approaches.

Effective faculty members in adult degree programs are sensitive to the special claims of adult students and work to establish situations that are conducive to adult learning. They viewed their students as persons whose particular frames of reference affected their participation in the learning process and took great care in understanding where their students were coming from. They promoted adult-adult interactions by speaking directly to their students' adulthood, by treating them as persons whose differences from the teachers could be measured only in terms of having less knowledge of a given subject matter. When conflicts arose between the students' external

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concerns and the demands of their learning, the effective teachers held their students accountable. They were persuasive and, when necessary, firm or confrontive when student concerns threatened to interfere with learning. Members of the control group displayed considerably less aptitude for holding their students accountable to the learning process. Only infrequently did they find ways to show students how certain learning tasks held rewards for them, and they seldom confronted students over unacceptable behaviors. Instead, the average teacher frequently chose to bend his or her own performance standards in order to dispose of a conflict. In several instances, members of the control group let students know that their work was marginal at best, but against their better judgment, passed it anyway.

The effective faculty members, in spite of some statements to the contrary, took a highly directive role in the facilitation of their students' learning. Characteristically, effective teachers began the process of identifying learning tasks by actively unearthing information about their students' learning needs and interests. But information seeking was only the beginning of a larger process. The study group members also exhibited skills in integrating disparate information about their students into diagnostic theories that, in turn, yielded prescriptions for action that would further their students' learning. One of our most striking findings was the extent to which the effective faculty members characteristically integrated all three of these competencies in their classroom teaching and mentoring. The average faculty members, by contrast, did not describe themselves as going through this three-stage process, and though they often made recommendations or gave assignments, they seldom explained how the recommendation made sense in terms of their particular students' circumstances.

The effective faculty members in this study also placed enormous emphasis on making use of their students' interests, attitudes, and experiences at all phases of the learning process, from assignments to class discussions to analysis of particular learning points. At the same time, effective teachers drew a functional distinction in their teaching between being student-centered--that is, being ready to capitalize on points at which they knew a student would connect with the learning issues at hand--and being student-directed. Through a variety of strategies, the effective teachers created learning situations in which it was the student who worked through the course issues, questions, or exercises and arrived at an understanding of the learning points in question. *This then, was the heart of the effective teachers' balancing act--the balancing of student-centeredness with a firm directiveness.*

One of the myths that many faculty members in higher education live by is that the key element in their teaching is their ability to model for the student what it means to be committed to the pursuit of an intellectual discipline. Many faculty members in this study--in both groups--referred to this self-schema urging that it was the faculty member's enthusiasm for and commitment to his or her subject that had the greatest impact on students. Several faculty members recalled the great teachers in their own past who had modeled such a commitment for them. Yet as we worked through the various transcripts, eliciting the patterns that underlie effective teaching, it seemed to us that what the effective faculty members were doing was not displaying their own intellectual lives but seeing how the resources of a subject matter, or even the resource of disciplined inquiry and analysis, could enlarge the students' own spheres of competence, perspective, and insight. Out of that kind of interaction comes a student who can do something or know something that he or she couldn't do or wasn't aware of before. This is, indeed, a different way of thinking about excellence in education.

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For a copy of the complete report, send $6.50 to The Balancing Act, Office of Continuing Education, University of Chicago, 1307 E. 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637.

KAREN WATKINS, EDITOR
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